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Rep. Michael Barnes, D-Md., a three-term congressman, is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Western Hemisphere affairs subcommittee and senior counselor to President Reagan's Central America commission. He writes in opposition to Reagan's military maneuvers in the region as part of UPI's 'Facing the Issues' package.

Reagan move all stick and no carrot By Rep. MICHAEL BARNES Written for UPI

The use of force, the threat of force, and the application of pressure based on power are all staples of international politics. The United States possesses greater power than any other country in the world, and no one would argue that we should act as if it were otherwise. We are not and should not be timid; we do not and ought not quail before small countries like Cuba and Nicaragua. We have important interests in Central America, and we must act vigorously to protect and advance those interests.

Allegations to the contrary by the administration and its supporters in Congress notwithstanding, the debate over the recently announced deployments in Central America -- indeed, over our entire Central America policy -- is not over any of the above propositions. They are accepted by all. The debate is over how we can apply our power and pursue our interests in Central America intelligently.

And the simple fact is that deployments, and other aspects of the administration's military overreaction in Central America, constitute an unwise use of our power. They do not serve our interests in fostering and sustaining stable, responsive governments in Central America that are not allied with our enemies, that respect the fundamental rights of their people, and that effectively pursue economic development.

The administration's policy of all stick and no carrot, exacerbates, rather than ameliorates, the problems and tensions in the region. It makes impossible a settlement of the conflict in El Salvador, and undermines democracy and economic development in Costa Rica and Honduras.

The timing of the deployments could not be worse. They come precisely when the Contadora Group -- Mexico, Columbia, Venezuela, and Panama -- has called for restraint in order to give the group time to get a process of political settlement started in the region. Our maneuvers have been criticised by the Contadora countries, and many others, as unhelpful in the peace process. The Venezuelan congress last week eve passed a resolution 'deploring' our actions. (Cuba and Nicaragua responded positively to the Contadora appeal.)

The deployments are clearly and unnecessarily provocative to the Nicaraguans. Already the CIA has armed, supplied, and financed more than 10,000 mercenaries who operate from bases in Honduras in an attempt to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The introduction of up to 4,000 U.S. combat troops into Honduras for an extended period of time, and the deployment of a naval task force off each of Nicaragua's coasts -- both for the express purpose of 'intimidating' Nicaragua -- doubles the provocation. No constructive resolution of the very real problems we have with Nicaragua is probable under these circumstances.

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The deployments threaten -- indeed, they assume -- a wider war. They deepen the implication of Honduras in Central America's troubles, and they provide a perfect pretext for further Cuban and Soviet involvement.

Equally important, the deployments take the spotlight away from the activities of Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, and direct the opprobrium of world opinion to the United States. These military moves are so out of proportion to the problems we face, and so raise the historic specter of yanqui intervention, that they have virtually no support in Latin American or the international community at large.

We must realize that our power consists not only -- or even principally -- of our military might, but also of our example of successful democratic government and our ability to help the countries of the region address the economic plight of their people. We would do both ourselves and Central America an enormous favor if we would make more effective use of those other instruments of our power and minimize the deployment of military force, which only invokes fear and hatred among the people of the region.